Reimar Schefold (author), Anna van Blankenstein (ed.), David Rosenthal (transl.), Natascha Jansen, Brad Flowers, Reimar Schefold (photography), *Toys for the Souls: Life and Art on the Mentawai Islands*, Bornival: Primedia, 220 pp., ISBN 9782960137590, price: EUR 39.00 / USD 45.00 (hardcover).

Toys for the Souls presents the everyday life of Mentawaians, their rituals, religious ideas, and how these inform everyday life. The scope is wide but the focus is on the material culture, the crafts and arts. The emphasis on artifacts in anthropology was encouraged in the Alfred Buhler school of anthropology in Basel, where the author studied in the 1960s. It has born fruit in this work, which, I infer, is his magnum opus. The book is an updated and expanded version of an exhibition catalogue (Schefold 1980) with the same title, in Dutch, and it is beautifully adorned with high quality studio photography of the Mentawaiian artifacts.

Among the Mentawaians, the creation of objects for daily life derives from the shamanistic ideas of life, an animistic worldview in which not only breathing beings and plants have souls, but also objects, whether natural or artificial. That is why even ordinary objects must be made attractive to the user, and also for the object itself, in order to support its desire to function properly. Humans must make their lives beautiful by way of decoration and festivities so that their souls enjoy life on earth and do not stray away to the ancestral realm. Beauty is thus necessary for harmony, which is granted by both immaterial beings, foremost the ancestors, and material entities. 'Toys for the souls' refers especially to carved wooden birds that are present when the shamans (*kerei*) summon the group's ancestors as toys for their souls, but also to other woodcarvings and flower decorations used in ritual contexts.

The lengthy introduction explains who the Mentawaians are, their history and origins. It is argued with convincing evidence that their culture is late-Neolithic with elements of early Metal Age culture, though this applies more to two-dimensional art than to their non-hierarchical social organization, which does not even have hereditary chiefs, like other Neolithic cultures in the Indonesian Archipelago. Schefold places the origins of the Austronesians in mainland Southeast Asia, with no mention of the well-known 'out of Taiwan' theory, and concludes from material evidence and artifact designs that the Mentawai islands were already colonized by the Mentawaiian ancestors when they came into contact with the Dongson culture in the last centuries BC.

The similarities with Dongson cultural assemblages is shown in ornaments (geometrical motifs, heart-shaped faces, realistic images of animals, and a special dancing figure), and in the shapes of hunting boats and old community

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houses (*uma*). Schefold's style is balanced, and claims about history, or other certainties, are presented with caution.

Due to the partly self-imposed isolation of the Mentawai culture, it has maintained its Neolithic heritage, unlike on the main islands of Indonesia, which have experienced and appropriated a constant influx of foreign influences, including Indian, Chinese, Muslim, and European. On the Mentawai islands, the cosmology is Mentawai-centric, but in one myth the original ancestors are a woman and a dog whose raft was washed up on the shore of Siberut. The pair had been expelled from somewhere because of a sexual relation and the woman was pregnant. Later their son searched for years for a woman to marry, in vain, and finally married his mother. Their children became the Mentawaians. Another myth tells about the origins of the Pleiades, namely eight orphans that sailed far away and became the star sign that marks two important seasons. Of the illuminating background material drawing on comparisons across the archipelago, I take pleasure in recognizing versions of these two myths from other parts of Indonesia (descendants from woman and dog [west Java], people as star sign and orphan ancestors [Flores]).

The Mentawai islands became part of the Dutch East Indies in 1864. Using both published and unpublished sources, the author describes how the Mentawaians reacted to the policies imposed on them by the Dutch, including "pacification" and an ambitious Christian mission that never really won people's hearts and minds. The new Indonesian Republic did not perform any better in this regard. In 1954 a government decree forced Mentawaians to convert to either Christianity or Islam, embarking on what can only be called a cultural genocide, which targeted, like the Dutch previously, the shamans in particular. Yet the traditional culture persisted in the interiors of Siberut, notably among the Sakkudei community, where Schefold commenced his fieldwork in 1968. Data and field photography date from then until 2015, and the last chapters are devoted to the changes that have occurred. What seemed like a hopeless situation during the 1980s has since changed. There is now a revival of Mentawai culture that finds support in the more enlightened government policies of the 2000s, and logging—previously detrimental to Mentawai communities—is controlled.

Chapter 3 is devoted in significant detail to the construction and arrangement of the *uma*, including the materials used and the ornamentation. *Uma* in Mentawai refers both to a communal unit of 5–10 families and the communal pile-house where they both live and hold their religious festivals. The *uma* emphasizes cohesion and is the property of all its members, who also sleep in field houses and huts near to the livestock, mainly pigs, which are prestigious and slaughtered for festivities. In Chapter 4 we learn that Mentawaians do not

have to struggle for subsistence, they get all they need from their plantations, and as hunter-gatherers from the river, the sea, and the forest. Nor do they have institutions that force them to create surpluses. Life can thus be lived according to the civilized motto *moile, moile* (slowly, slowly), which means respecting the soul and good manners. The Mentawaians, it is argued, show us an alternative way of life to the global ideology of profit.

The text describes well how work is performed, and how tasks are divided between men and women (men hunt and women fish, for example), and it is interspersed with field photography, providing a valuable visual anthropology. In all, there are 278 photographs and illustrations of the material culture and its crafting, canoes, bows and arrows, basketry, kitchen utensils, necklaces, carvings, the now rare and odd *jaraik*, a form of tattooing—in short, everything. Hats off to Brad Flowers and Steven Alpert for the beautiful studio photography and careful reproduction of the crafts and art pieces, mostly taken from museum collections. They have helped to show how rituals and aesthetics, ancient and creative, merge with the Mentawaiian traditional way of life.

In sum, *Toys for the Souls* is a detailed graphic-ethnographic account of the traditional Mentawaiian lifestyle and impressive arts and crafts, in the form of a pleasant coffee table book reflecting Mentawaiian cosmology. The work is scholarly but accessible to a wide audience, not least because of the photography.

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Reference

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